



## Summer reading loss

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“I know my students covered important reading skills last school year, but I still need to spend so much time reviewing those same skills at the start of the new school year.” Comments like this reflect the all too common laments of teachers who, after having worked so hard during the academic year to establish a solid foundation for continued literacy learning, find that when a new school year begins too many of their students seem to be starting from scratch. Often, it is the students who can least afford to lose the reading gains they’ve achieved during the school year who fall the farthest behind when they return to the classroom after a summer break away from formal literacy instruction.

The achievement gap between high-socioeconomic and low-socioeconomic students has long been a source of concern for educators and policymakers. The passage of the first Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and accompanying Title I legislation back in 1964 assured unprecedented funding to support and improve reading programs for children across socioeconomic lines. Seeking to provide equitable resources for impoverished school districts, the U.S. Congress continually revised the ESEA over four decades, creating programs to assist migrant, neglected, and limited English proficient children.

The passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), including the Reading First and Early Reading First programs in 2001, has intensified the attention focused on accountability and achievement in literacy education. Mandatory testing of student performance has also increased notably over the past several years. High-stakes tests, the results of which carry potentially significant rewards

and penalties for schools, districts, individual teachers, administrators, and students, are, to the concern of many educators, administered to students at younger and younger ages and with greater frequency than ever before (Hoffman et al., 1999).

Despite the increased attention focused on literacy achievement across socioeconomic lines, The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP; 2002) reported that proficient readers are improving while struggling readers are continuing to lose ground. For example, 58% of fourth-grade students eligible for free-lunch programs fell below basic reading proficiency levels. By contrast, 27% of fourth-grade students from higher income areas fell below basic proficiency levels. NAEP data released in 2005 indicated that, while the percentage of fourth graders performing at or above a proficient level increased between 1992 and 2003, the percentage of fourth graders at or above a basic level was not found to have changed significantly during that same period of time (NAEP, 2005). The achievement gap persists. Questions remain about the extent to which summer reading loss contributes to this gap and what educators can do to lessen its impact.

### How does summer loss affect students’ reading achievement?

Summer reading loss refers to the decline in children’s reading development that can occur during summer vacation times when children are away from the classroom and not participating in formal literacy programs (Allington & McGill-Franzen,

2003). Far from being an intuitive perception in the minds of educators, the reality of summer reading loss is well documented—and it is more persistent among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who are already at risk for academic failure. Researchers have uncovered evidence to suggest that the impact of summer reading loss on students in general, and on at-risk students in particular, is significant.

A review of 13 empirical studies representing approximately 40,000 students found that, on average, the reading proficiency levels of students from lower income families declined over the summer months, while the reading proficiency levels of students from middle-income families improved modestly. In a single academic year, this decline resulted in an estimated three-month achievement gap between more advantaged and less advantaged students. Between grades 1 and 6, the potential cumulative impact of this achievement gap could compound to 1.5 years' worth of reading development lost in the summer months alone (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996).

In their review of reading achievement gains in Title I reading programs, Borman and D'Agostino (1996) found that achievement gains were significantly higher from fall to spring when students were enrolled in school reading classes, but they were lower from spring to spring, when the summer months, in which students were not participating in school reading programs, were considered.

In other studies, the reading achievement of both high- and low-income students was found to improve during the academic year, yet the overall achievement gap between the two groups remained high. A longitudinal study of high- and low-income students found that, while both groups of students made comparable gains in reading achievement during the academic year, by the end of sixth grade the achievement gap between high- and low-income students had grown to approximately three grade-level years (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997).

After examining 3,000 students over a two-year period, Heyns (1987) found that the top quartile made rapid gains during the academic year and slower, albeit continued, growth over the summer months. The reading achievement of average students remained steady or fell slightly over the summers. The bottom quartile of students made comparatively slower gains in reading achievement

during the academic year and then lost a significant portion of those gains over each summer. Some have suggested that nearly 80% of the achievement difference between high-income and low-income students may be attributable to summer reading loss (Hayes & Grether, 1983).

Our research with 116 first, second, and third graders in a school in a middle class neighborhood found that the decoding skills of nearly 45% of the participants and the fluency skills of 25% declined between May and September. Lower achieving students exhibited a sharper decline than higher achieving students.

While working in a lower socioeconomic-status, urban school whose students were already performing, on average, significantly below expectations, we found declines over summer in word decoding among fourth graders and declines in both word decoding and reading fluency among sixth graders.

At a time when the policy climate is intensely focused on raising the achievement levels of all students, summer reading loss seems to have its greatest impact on low-achieving students and at-risk students—those who can least afford to fall further behind.

## Why does summer reading loss occur?

Access to reading materials has been consistently identified as a vital element in enhancing the reading development of children. Of all the activities in which children engage outside of school, time spent actually reading is the best predictor of reading achievement—the more students read, the better readers they become (Allington, 2006; Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988). The research indicates also that students, on average, spend pitifully little time reading outside of school—about 10 minutes (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding).

All too often, however, low-performing readers are offered little or no opportunity beyond the classroom to improve their reading proficiency (Coats & Taylor-Clark, 2001). Children from low-income households have a limited selection of books to read both within their homes and their communities (McQuillan, 1998). Wealthier communities have been found to have up to three businesses selling children's books for every one such

business that existed in poorer communities (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Other barriers to reading at home include parents' lack of awareness of the benefits of reading to children and lack of confidence in reading, particularly in the case of adults who are themselves English-language learners or who possess a low literacy level.

In an effort to respond to the lack of access to reading materials and to the need for continued reading instruction, some school districts offer formal summer intervention programs or summer book lists with suggested or required titles. While these initiatives can be effective for some students, for others participation in them is not probable. Even if formal reading instruction cannot be part of all students' summer schedules, there are recommendations that teachers can make to help families support children's reading development when school is not in session.

## **What can be done to curb summer reading loss?**

The value placed on literacy in the home, time spent reading with children, and the availability and use of reading materials have been identified as important elements in children's reading success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Supporting reading development over the summer months can be done in ways that tap into children's own interests and imaginations. It is not enough, however, to simply tell parents that it is important to read to children. Parents, particularly lower socioeconomic-status parents, need to be offered concrete, specific programs and suggestions on how to participate in family literacy, and they need to be supported in their attempts to do so (Edwards, 2004).

Schools and teachers can do much to set the stage for children's continued engagement in literacy over the summer. Schools can host workshops for parents in the weeks before the start of summer vacation in which teachers make the case for summer reading and share suggestions for keeping children engaged over the summer months. This would be a wonderful time to coordinate with the local public library on its summer reading program. Perhaps the library could arrange to sign up parents

and children for library cards and the summer reading program at one of the school workshops.

A required summer reading list of three to five proven favorites for which children will be accountable when school begins again may be appropriate for some schools. Teachers need to be sure that the books assigned are readily available at the local library. Perhaps the school library could remain open over the summer, on a limited basis, to facilitate student reading and access to materials.

Some schools may want to initiate a variation of the Reading Millionaires program that is most often implemented during the school year (Rasinski & Padak, 2004). In a school of 400 students, if each student read 30 minutes a day over the course of a 75-day summer vacation, the total amount of reading done by the student body would be about a million minutes. The school parent-teacher association could arrange to run the program with students submitting weekly logs of the number of minutes read to the school. A team of parents would tally the minutes by student, grade level, and whole school. Outside, the school could display the cumulative total of minutes read. Reminders could be sent periodically to children and parents about the program. The school year would then begin with a celebration of achieving the summer reading goal and with recognition given to individual students and grade levels that achieved or exceeded their goals.

At the family level, the International Reading Association (1998) suggested that parents look for reading materials that relate to interests that a child enjoys, such as baseball, swimming, animals, or nature. Families may need to be assured that useful reading materials come in many forms. In addition to books, children's magazines may link to a child's interest or hobby. While reasonable limits should be set for television viewing, television programs and age-appropriate movies that are based on books can serve as a catalyst for reading. Moreover, when watching television, parents should be advised to engage the captioning feature (and reduce the volume) so that students have access to and are encouraged to read the words on the television screen. Every word that is read counts.

Daily routines provide reading opportunities. Cooking, using the phone book, reading the television listing in a local newspaper, looking for information on the World Wide Web, reading directions for using a new gadget, or reading a brochure or article about a

place to which the family may travel during the summer can all provide authentic reading experiences.

The value of modeling reading for children needs to be reiterated to families. All too often families unwittingly send the message to children that reading is a chore: something that must be finished before one can proceed to more active and enjoyable pursuits. Instead, it is important to remind families of the need to create a positive climate for reading so that children look forward to reading. Encourage parents or caregivers to show their children how family members use reading to extend their own interests and acquire information. Let children see family members reading and talking together about what they have read.

Books and other reading materials can be made available during transition times. Children can read on the way to a destination, at the park, at the beach, or while waiting for an appointment. A local library can, of course, help to suggest reading materials. Encourage families to make regular visits to the library and allow children to explore different reading materials. Librarians can offer suggestions that might be a good match for a child's interests and reading level. Keep in mind that reading books that seem slightly below a child's reading level or books that have become "old favorites" can help a developing reader to build confidence and fluency. Table 1 outlines additional suggestions that teachers can make to families of early readers and more advanced readers.

## What elements contribute to family literacy participation?

There is little doubt that family participation in children's literacy experiences is valuable and needed, especially if attempting to increase children's literacy experiences over the summer months. Educators seek to establish an effective climate for family literacy programs and to elicit substantive family participation in those programs. The following elements have been identified in literacy programs that successfully engage families in participating (Neuman, Caperelli, & Kee, 1998).

**An established sense of community.** Family members can offer insights for understanding individual children as well as information to enhance

specific units of study. Recognize that every member has something useful to contribute.

**Teachers' effective interpersonal skills.** A teacher's interpersonal skills, along with his or her perceived professional competence, affects parents' willingness to participate. Simple gestures that convey welcome and an appropriate level of concern can enhance teacher-parent rapport.

**Ongoing and varied communication.** Parent-teacher communication can and should take a variety of forms. Those forms can include face-to-face contact, phone calls (those calls can convey positive messages as well express concern), classroom newsletters sent home on a consistent basis, as well as opportunities for parents to visit the classroom and learn firsthand about what is happening there.

**Consistent recruitment of family participation.** Requesting and encouraging family participation needs to happen consistently over the course of the school year. The more opportunities families have to interact with one another, the more likely their participation in school programs is to increase.

**The suggestion of a variety of literacy activities for the home.** Families need concrete suggestions about how to support literacy development at home. The ideas presented in this article can serve as a starting point. When making suggestions to parents, teachers need to keep in mind that effective family literacy interactions should seek to promote the natural and enjoyable interactions between parents and children, not to make the home environment a structured extension of the classroom.

**Teachers' understanding of family challenges.** The vast majority of families want to provide a home environment that will allow younger members to thrive. Life circumstances often make this hope a difficult reality to accomplish. Be aware of circumstances that may make literacy participation challenging for some families. When possible, offer suggestions and resources that may aid families in overcoming these challenges

Summer reading loss is a documented reality for many students. It is often of greatest concern for those students who are already at risk—who typically have limited access to reading materials at

**TABLE 1**  
**Literacy advice for families**

*Literacy tips for early readers*

- Point out print in the child's environment: on cereal boxes, food labels, toys, restaurants, and traffic signs.
- Sing songs, say short poems or nursery rhymes, and play rhyming words games with your child.
- Tell stories to your child.
- Read aloud to your child. Point to the words on the page as you read.
- Read a short passage several times to your child until your child can read it with you. Then encourage your child to read the passage to you.
- Encourage older children to read with younger children.
- Encourage your child to read (or pretend read) to you. Make this reading enjoyable. Don't worry if your child does not read all of the words correctly but, rather, applaud your child's efforts to read.
- Go to the library together.
- Have books, magazines, and newspapers around the house. Let your child see you reading.
- Encourage your child to write messages such as grocery lists, to-do lists, postcards, or short messages to family members or friends. Don't worry about conventional spelling at this point but, rather, encourage your child's first efforts at authorship.
- When watching television, have the captioning feature enabled so that the children view the words while hearing them performed aloud.

*Literacy tips for more advanced readers*

- Talk to your child about what he or she is reading. Ask open-ended questions such as "What do you think about that story?" "What would you have done if you were that character?"
- Make reading and writing a regular part of your daily home activities. Let your child see you using reading and writing for real purposes.
- Visit the public library. Help your child to get his or her own library card.
- Read to your child regularly, even after your child is able to read some books independently.
- Listen to your child read. Use strategies to help your child with tricky words. For example, when your child comes to an unfamiliar word, you might say, "Skip it and read to the end of the sentence. Now try again—what makes sense and looks like the word that you see?"
- Praise your child's efforts at reading.
- Play word games such as thinking of different words to describe the same things.
- Support your child's writing. Have writing materials such as paper, markers, and pencils available. Read what your child writes.
- Set reasonable limits for television viewing.

Adapted from Mraz, Padak, & Baycich (2002).

home and parents or caregivers who may be reluctant to or unsure of how to help. By raising parents' awareness of the importance of supporting their children's reading development during the summer months and by providing concrete guidelines on how to do so, teachers and students may be better able to start anew instead of starting from scratch when the next school year begins.

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